HIDDEN AGENDAS IN CONFLICT RESEARCH: INFORMANTS’ INTERESTS AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVITY IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Introduction

Research on violent conflict is often considered perilous because information is difficult to come by. It is assumed that warlords and combatants are reluctant to share information because of fears of retribution by state or supra state war crimes tribunals or that such information might be intercepted and used by enemy forces. This is why one of the ethical considerations of social research in conflict settings is to protect the identities of informants, especially those likely to be linked to war crimes. The desire to protect the identity of the informant also stems from the assumption that informants are disinterested parties in social research. The researcher is then considered to be the active person out to extract information from the informant. This assumption occludes the agency and interests of informants; it overlooks the fact that in violent conflict informants have agendas they wish to promote. As this chapter shows, informants are often proactive in using the interview opportunity to state their own side of the story, which they will claim has been misrepresented by their opponents and powerful third parties. Informants are not just sources trying to cooperate to achieve the researcher’s objectives. They are also rational actors who want to use the researcher as their mouthpiece and advocate.

Apart from promoting the corporate interests of their communities, individual informants may also want to further their individual careers and roles. At different phases of the conflict, they may want to be invited to negotiation and reconciliation meetings, and to aspire to be in the corridors of power when conflict ends. Such informants not only want to be mentioned by name but often overstate their contributions to group mobilization and the war effort. Ambitious informants may insist on getting copies of research reports, which they will use to make leadership claims within their groups. In other words, the observant researcher will discover that his/her research becomes an arena
of struggle for preeminence by elites seeking recognition as community leaders and spokespersons. Given these aspirations, informants become keen to talk with researchers, especially those likely to give them greater publicity, for example by posting their reports on the World Wide Web. In African contexts, this gives ‘outside’ Western or African researchers attached to Western institutions more access than ‘insiders’.

This chapter discusses methodological and ethical issues that arise from the self-interest of informants. It seeks to show that the objectivity of research in conflict settings is compromised not just by the researcher’s interests but by those of informants as well. The task of attaining objectivity in social research in conflict settings thus becomes herculean, because sources and narratives, such as local ethnic histories, are seldom objective. The chapter is based on the author’s doctoral research on violent conflict in two multi-ethnic cities in Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

The study

The objective of my PhD research was to find out why some multi-ethnic and divided societies manage to maintain peace amidst conflict while other such societies suffer intermittent and sporadic violence. The research was partly inspired by the recent interest in studying ethnic peace, an interest opposed to the prevalent perception that we live in a world in which violent identity-based conflict is ubiquitous. My research challenged the perception of a conflict-ridden world, suggesting instead that what needs more interrogation is ethnic peace. As Crawford Young puts it, ‘in most places the everyday lived experience of cultural pluralism is civil, often harmonious’, despite the fact that 90 per cent of the world’s nation-states are culturally plural (Young 1999, 2). Even in those countries with histories of violent conflict, it has been established that violence is often localized, not generalized. For instance, some studies of Burundi indicate that particular regions have been spared the carnage that the country has experienced over time (Lemarchand 2004). One of the major contributions of the new research direction is that it has encouraged comparative studies of so-called ‘violent’ and ‘non-violent’ societies.

It is against this background that my study adopted a comparative approach. I selected two cities (administrative divisions) in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region that are similar in terms of ethnic structure and